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ART WORKS BLOG

Music and the Mind: A Conversation with Dr. Sheri Robb and Ben Folds

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By Victoria Hutter



Sheri Robb and Ben Folds at the symposium Sound Health: Music and the Mind. Photo courtesy of Dr. Robb

Back in early June, the NEA partnered with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the National Institutes of Health on a two-day symposium called **Sound Health: Music and the Mind**. True to its title, the gathering brought together researchers and therapists, artists and musicians, and many people simply interested in learning more about what happens at the intersection of art and science.

One session, Breakthroughs with Music Therapy: Recovery, Resilience & Quality of Life, was hosted by **Dr. Sheri Robb**, a leading researcher and scientist of music therapy and **Ben Folds**, singer, songwriter, and music therapy enthusiast. The two came at the session's topic from their different professional perspectives with Robb sharing information as moderator and presenter, and Folds improvising at the piano between segments, at one point bringing the audience into a moment of communal music-making.

Given the emphasis on music therapy as part of **Creative Forces: NEA Military Healing Arts Network**, this was an enlightening session and it was wonderful to have a chance to catch up with Robb and Folds afterwards.

NEA: In the session, presenter Deforia Lane described music therapy as the “headline to emotions.” Can you speak to this observation?

ROBB: Music is tied to so many life events, marriages, breakups, startups and when we have these experiences it makes a strong music and emotional memory. Those memories get encoded. Individuals who have Alzheimer's, dementia, who have problems with short-term memory, do have long-term embedded memories that are often attached to music. Many times even with stroke patients when part of the brain is injured, their long-term memory is intact so you can use music to help them communicate. They can't talk but they can sing. Using singing as a starting point, you then move into speech.

FOLDS: I was going through an airport recently and noticed that of the top 10 books on sale, there must have been six that were about the brain. People are fascinated by any proof that something physical occurs through art. That there's actually more tissue between two lobes, for example. But at the end of the day, the number of fields that could be impacted by music therapy are endless, as many things as we want to solve. And I want people to understand that.

NEA: What experience have you had working with military personnel through music?

ROBB: That's not my area of expertise although I do know music therapists that are working with veterans who do remarkable work in terms of motor rehabilitation, cognition rehabilitation, or working through traumatic stress symptoms.

FOLDS: For many years, I operated the historic RCA Studio A in Nashville, and during that time I loaned it out pro bono to allow for songwriting and recording sessions for veterans. The idea was that you write songs with veterans and they get to talk about what they're doing within a framework of music. You're talking about a bunch of pretty tough guys, but making a kick ass song was effective for some.

NEA: How do you get past the preconceptions from any prospective client that music therapy isn't for them because they may not be a musician?

ROBB: It's important to work with a credentialed therapist because the military service members are processing many traumatic experiences and a lot comes up through the music so it's good to have a trained person who can handle the "What do I do now?" question.

FOLDS: And in my case, if I was writing a song with them, I might get to a point when I'm in over my head. I know what chord to go to next but . . .

ROBB: That's why we advocate for having a credentialed therapist. Music is such a powerful way to help people to express themselves. Intense things can come out and you need to have the skills to help the individual with those experiences.

But your question about people coming to music therapy who don't have a strong musical background, that's something that we always have to address. That's where the skill of the music therapist comes in, being able to create a situation where an individual can be successful and will sound really good and not feel inhibited. It's that skillful way of involving them into the experience in a meaningful way. Ben does that with audiences all the time when he improvises.

FOLDS: One thing that has begun to occur to me over the time that I have been a cheerleader for music therapy is that we live in a time and place where you feel you need a license to sing. You should have a stylist, wear the right thing, have everything at your disposal. Although a lot of places aren't like that, the effect of music therapy in the larger sense is that it helps bring us back from a society that can repress music and singing.

I grew up in the South. When I was told what kind of singer I was, it was not good. Just in order to go out and play the songs that I'd written that I wanted people to hear, I was nearly sick on my stomach every single time I played for years. It was something that I had to overcome and I'm fine. But it tells me a lot about what a music therapist is up against. Because if you had me at 15 years old in music therapy, I would have been a tough patient. By bringing us back into music, we can be healthier in general.

NEA: Ben, how has your experience with music therapy influenced either the songs you write or the process of writing songs?

FOLDS: It emphasizes the empathy part of performing, sensitizes you, and reminds you that music is communication, a fancy Morse code. Entertainment is involved but at the center, you're saying something.

*Hear more from Ben Folds about his life in music in our **2016 Art Talk with him**. Learn more about creative arts therapies and the military on our **Creative Forces page**.*

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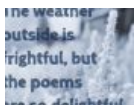
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